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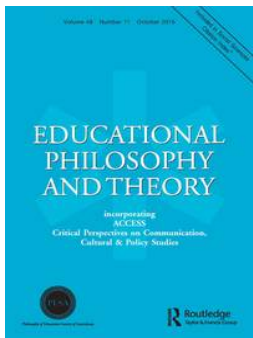
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Anwar Tlili

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In Search of Museum Professional Knowledge Base: Mapping the professional knowledge debate onto museum work

ANWAR TLILI

Department of Education & Professional Studies, King's College London

Abstract

Museum professionalism remains an unexplored area in museum studies, particularly with regard to what is arguably the core generic question of a sui generis professional knowledge base, and its necessary and sufficient conditions. The need to examine this question becomes all the more important with the increasing expansion of the museum's roles and functions. This paper starts by mapping out the policy and organizational context within which the roles of museums have expanded in the UK. It then situates the discussion of museum professional knowledge within a cross-disciplinary matrix bearing on the question of what is professional about occupations classified—or classifiable—as professions. Against the backdrop of the current organizational context of the museum as well as theories of professional knowledge, it highlights the ways in which museum work, more specifically museography, poses a distinctive set of questions compared to other 'professional' fields; the paper thus homes in on the question of what it is that constitutes the uniqueness of museum professional knowledge in relation to museographic practice and the type of professional knowledge and expertise that can sustain it and enact its creative and educational potentials and affordances.

Keywords: museums, museography, professional knowledge, professionalism, creativity

Introduction

There has recently been an explosion of interest in the museum as an educational and social institution, over and above its archetypal role as an institution of display. Whether due to external policy- and funding-related levers, or endogenous shifts and imperatives in the organizational culture of museums, or some combination of the two, museums have been through a radical overhaul and reshaping of their operational mode and remit; and so have the value and knowledge base that can make

possible and sustain these changes. Recent developments in museum theory, policy and practice have generated an extensive literature focusing on the growing facets of what museums do, ranging from exhibit design, the learning and educational affordances of museums, to their social and cultural roles (Black, 2011; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Macdonald, 2010; Seagram, Patten, & Lockett, 1993; Simon, 2010; Vergo, 1989). The growing literature has explored and charted new frontiers in museum thinking and practice. However, this contrasts with the limited amount of work on the nature of museum work as a profession or—as Larson (1977) would say—as a ‘professional project’; particularly with regard to the nature of the knowledge and expertise base that can and should support museum work and its claim to professionalism. On the other hand, this also contrasts with the extensive body of literature on the sociological and philosophical bases (epistemic, ethical and axiological) for the professionalism claim made by other occupational groups (e.g. medicine, nursing, teaching, architecture, law, accountancy, etc.).

Despite some notable exceptions (Boylan, 2006a, 2006b; Charman, 2005; DiMaggio, 1983; Kavanagh, 1994; Octobre, 1999; O’Neill, 2008; Teather, 1991; Weil, 1990, 2002), there is a remarkably limited amount of literature on the nature of museum professionalism as an area of study in its own right, especially in connection with the professional knowledge problem and its attendant epistemological and practical questions. In the museum studies literature as well as the policy literature, the museum ‘profession’ often tends to be either presupposed as something that has already been achieved on the grounds of the formal university-based training and qualifications already in place, or as something that is given and co-extensive with museum work anyway (with ‘profession’ often used in the broader sense of ‘occupation’). What seems to be lacking is an engagement with the nature of what makes—or could or ought to make—museum work professional or—more precisely—more professionalized. For example, ICOM (International Council of Museums), the ‘international organization representing museums and museum professionals’, both recognizes the existence of many professions within museums and acknowledges that not all occupational roles within the museum world are recognized as professions (ICOM [International Council for Museums], 2010, p. 68).

Reflecting on the situation of museum work in the late 1980s, museum practitioner and theorist Stephen Weil (1990, pp. 73–89) found himself concerned with the question of to what extent and in what ways museum work could be regarded as a profession; to what extent it had been professionalized; and in what ways the push for professionalization was facilitated or thwarted by the changing circumstances of museum work as a result of the then already multiplying roles of the museum vis-à-vis public culture and society at large. Although Weil’s thoughts and questions arose within the US museum context of the mid-1980s, many of the points he raised about the potential for professionalizing museum work still resonate with the current situation of museum work, both in the US and across other comparable national contexts where the museum has of late undergone parallel transformations widening its social and cultural mission and remit of operation (Anderson, 2012). This paper aims to formulate and approach a host of questions that, whilst in some respects revisiting

some of Stephen Weil's mid-1980s reflections, are focused primarily around the nature of the professional knowledge/expertise base for museum work.

The aim of this paper is not so much to provide a clear-cut final set of answers to the question of what constitutes or should constitute museum professionalism or museum professional knowledge; rather, the aim is to trace a few lines of thinking towards a better conceptualization of the uniqueness of work in museums that is specifically museum like, what will be referred to as museography. I begin by outlining the policy and organizational context within which the roles of museums have expanded. This is followed by an attempt to situate the discussion in this paper within a cross-disciplinary matrix of theories and debates bearing on the question of what is professional about occupations classified, or classifiable, as such; then I home in on the question of what it is that constitutes the uniqueness of museum professional knowledge in relation to museographic practice.

Methodology

Standing in the backdrop to the analysis presented in this paper are empirical findings from a research project that set out to examine and map out the current changes in the professional and organizational cultures in publicly funded museums in England and to explore how recent museum policies were reshaping publicly funded museums and the professional/organizational cultures emerging in response. The study has employed qualitative data consisting of both policy documents and in-depth semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of museum staff and representatives from several policy-making and professional bodies in the museum sector in England. The accounts, views and experiences of 44 interviewees have been gathered, drawn from a diverse sample of 9 publicly funded museums in England, selected on the basis of size, geographical location, source of funding (central or local government), the disciplinary nature of exhibits (science, art and social history), in addition to representatives of five professional and policy-making bodies relevant to the museum sector in England.¹

Within the large museums in this study, the aim was to have interviewees acting as representatives of management and a cross-section of roles, drawn broadly from the broad areas of education (including outreach), communications, curatorship and marketing. The internal organization and distribution of roles within museums varied to a significant degree, with the main variable being the size of the museum. Most small museums have a workforce of less than seven people, and some as few as one person. So the selection criteria for the interviewees had to accommodate this variability in size to recruit a number of interviewees proportionate to the size of each of the participating museum's workforce.

Before the start of data collection, the research project was granted research ethics clearance by the author's HE institution, and then the study was carried out in accordance with the terms of the research ethics framework that had been approved by the HE institution.

The interview data, against the backdrop of the documentary analysis of policies, have been coded and then put through a thematic analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein,

2003; Boyatzis, 1998) in light of the study's aims, informed by both the policy analysis and 'sensitizing concepts' (van den Hoonaard, 1996) drawn from the cross-disciplinary body of literature used to inform the conceptual framework of this paper. The data were thus reduced via a thematic coding based on thematic parameters derived from the core research questions of the study. In connection with the arguments that appear in this paper specifically, the thematic strands that have been used to inform this paper revolve around (a) the range of skills, work techniques, forms of knowledge and expertise employed by museum professionals in the course of their work; (b) the attributes perceived to be essential and generic to museum work; and (c) the conceptions of museum professionalism (to examine the extent to which there is a grounded self-concept of a generic museum professional identity or if it is a case of the organizational identity of a given museum that encompasses discrete and different professional roles). The thematic reduction, segmentation and categorization of the data based on these descriptive thematic frames were then filtered through a grid of 'sensitizing concepts' drawn from the literature that formed the core of the conceptual framework that informs the discussion in this paper. The core and most recurrent sensitizing concepts that were used to conceptually map the data were: disciplinary knowledge, craft knowledge (know-how), professional values/ethics, organizational identity, professional identity, creativity and the impact of new managerialism. From there, thematic patterns of experience, perceptions and views were identified, and then synthesized and analysed in relation to one another.

This paper aims primarily to unpack the philosophical underpinnings of what can constitute museum professional knowledge in the first place; it will develop against the backdrop of these empirical findings and cite them directly where there is added value of direct citations. In parallel, the analysis in this paper builds on insights and concepts, many of which used as 'sensitizing concepts' during the analysis process, drawn from pioneering pieces of work on the professionalism of museum work, as well as from mainstream sociology of the professions and applied philosophy, to help highlight the unique case of museum work.

Background: Museums and Professionalism

Although the UK museum context constitutes the backdrop to the arguments made in this paper, the points made about the nature of museum professionalism can have wider relevance and resonance with regard to the question of how to understand the case of museum work across and beyond national policy-making contexts. This is partly because the institution of museum has gone through comparable transformations over the last two decades or so, in many national policy-making contexts, all focused around expanding the role of the museum, such that it can be harnessed to educational, cultural and even social policy ends (Anderson, 2012; McCall, 2009; McCall & Gray, 2014; McPherson, 2006; Message, 2008, 2013; O'Neill, 2008; Scott, 2009). This is also partly due to the universal core of what it means to be a museum, despite its evolution and change over time. As the ICOM (2007) definition of the museum goes (updated in the 2007 ICOM conference):

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM, 2007, p. 2)

The Organizational Culture of the Museum Reinvented

The UK has about 2500 museums, including art galleries, with around 10,000 people employed in the museum sector (Museums Association, 2015). According to the now well-established annual survey conducted by the Department of Media, Culture & Sport (DCMS, 2015), published in June 2015, 52% of adults had visited a museum or gallery in the previous year, a significant increase compared to the time when the annual survey started 10 years before. Despite its peculiar and—in Foucault’s word (1994)—‘heterotopic’ kernel,² the museum has acquired a cultural, social and educational salience that takes comparable forms in many Western countries (Vergo, 1989; Preziosi, 2006). However, the museum has, over the last two decades or so, come under a great deal of questioning on both instrumentalist and political grounds: the instrumentalist—and in some ways populist—argument is that it caters to the cultural indulgences of the educated few, with little utility for the majority; the political argument sees the museum as essentially a repository or relay of dominant cultures and values. This questioning has come both from within and from without the museum world (Seagram et al., 1993; Vergo, 1989), and in fact museums’ own self-questioning and their attempt to depart from the elitist *modus operandi* had even preceded the policies, especially at local level (Hooper-Greenhill, Sandell, Moussouri, & O’Riain, 2000). It was thus widely felt that museums had to do a hard self-critical overhaul of the way they work, collect, interpret, manage themselves and relate to the public. In this climate, museums could no longer simply make the tacit appeal to what could be described—in Walter Benjamin’s terms—as the ‘cult’ or ‘aura’ value of artefacts (Benjamin, 1999; pp. 221–224), or some extant traces of them that are ‘held ... on behalf of the public in “trust” for future generations’ (MMC, 2000). Museums have thus been seeking to reinvent and expand their organizational identity and reposition themselves in the public space.

In parallel, the UK Government’s new policies for museums has since its inception in the late 1990s gradually redefined the terms of reference with regard to the social role of museums (Kawashima, 1998, 2006; Mason, 2004; Newman, 2013; Newman & McLean, 2004; Tlili, 2008). This set in motion a process of decentring museum collections, and placing the public, including the non-visiting sections of the public, right at the centre of what museums are required to do (DCMS, 1999a, 2000). The early policy version of the policy-driven social inclusion agenda in museums was primarily a matter of tackling access barriers standing in the way of ‘untraditional’ audiences that DCMS defined as ‘target groups’, i.e. minority ethnic groups, disadvantaged socio-economic groups and neighbourhoods, and people with disabilities (DCMS, 1999a, 2000; Kawashima, 2006). Later, there occurred what can be described as the social policy turn in museum policy (McCall, 2009) whereby

museums were now expected to act as ‘agents of social change’ whose ultimate aim was to contribute to improving ‘the quality of life’ of the excluded and those at risk of social exclusion (DCMS, 1999b, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). Museums are thus required—from the point of view of policy—to combine multiple roles and functions, and connect to a wide range of public services, and demonstrate their social value in instrumentalist terms and in relation to broader, mainly non-cultural, policy objectives (Gray, 2008; McCall, 2009; Newman, 2013; Tlili, 2008; Tlili, Gewirtz, & Cribb, 2007). This multiplicity of roles and expectation to feed into wider social policy functions that are not necessarily cultural can be at the expense of the core of what museums are essentially about, arguably what is ‘museal’ about museums, namely the collections and the scholarly and creative work around them. As a member of the senior management in a large local museum notes:

It happened many times in the last 18 years where suddenly museums ... were involved in discussions where you suddenly realise the last thing you are talking is about the collections. Museums are seen as leaders of social change, social integration, social inclusion, social wellbeing, regeneration, a tourist attraction ... all of these sort of things ... it’s very easy within all sort of that to lose sight that museums are centred around collections.

Driven by a combination of an instrumentalist policy ethos (Davies, 2008; Gray, 2008, 2011; Levitt, 2008), a certain cultural populism with a consumerist bent (McGuigan, 2004, 2010) and the managerialization of public sector organizations under the new managerialist regime (or New Public Management) (Clarke, Gewirtz, & McLaughlin, 2000; Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Newman, 2013), the museum has been redefined as an instrumentalizable service to the extent that it owes its existence to the tax-paying public of citizen-consumers (Gray, 2008, 2011; Levitt, 2008; Tlili, 2008; Tlili et al., 2007). In one sense, museum work can be seen as a public service fulfilling cultural, educational and civic functions for the public. However, the repositioning of museums as a service, modelled on other services, is not without its problems. It is built on an implicit equation of the intrinsic value of museum objects and what is putatively valuable to the public. The policy-driven move to recast the museum as a public service can have paradoxical effects on the status of museum work with regard to its ‘professional project’. In one sense, it can be construed as ostensibly promising to install museum work on a par with more professionalized occupations that provide a public service. This is so because this can give the impression that museums are now ‘taken more seriously’, as it were, and recognized to have a function oriented towards the public good, a function that can no longer be reduced to some form of elitist indulgence or an expression of elitist cultures. However, a more cautious assessment is required within the current new managerialist ethos of restructuring public sector organizations and its likely effects on professional fields (Beck, 2008; Evetts, 2009; Exworthy & Halford, 1999). New managerialism, the current mode of coordinating and governing public sector organizations in the UK and many other comparable policy contexts (Clarke et al., 2000; Cutler & Waine, 2000), is more likely than not—through effects intended and unintended—to undermine public sector professionalism in general, although it can have a positive impact on the

operational side of the governance and management of public sector organizations, at least from the point of view of the efficiency of formal procedures. However, despite the financial and operational efficiency that it could facilitate, new managerialism's most likely effects, as many studies have shown in connection with other occupations, is a process of de-professionalization of even the more established professions (Beck, 2008; Evetts, 2009), especially with regard to their autonomy to use their occupation-specific esoteric expertise to respond to the indeterminacies of the practice field. Museum work will be no exception in this regard; if anything, it is likely it will be more prone to the vagaries of new managerialism and its reductive technicist rationality that can thwart the creativity of museum works (Tlili, 2014). As a senior manager in a small local museum who participated in the study puts it:

I think there is a tension I suppose between the needs and aims of objectives, a big corporate body like a council [local authority] and the creativity of a team. So yeah, I see it, I do think there is a tension now between, at some level you have to ... respond to priorities, but I have a slight concern about how that stifles creativity and initiatives sometimes at lower levels in staff structure, because I think essentially people are professionals, they do know their jobs and their roles, they are very well motivated to fulfil it.

The need to examine the professionalism of museum work becomes all the more important against the backdrop of the widening operational remit of the museum under the new managerialist ethos. As highlighted by a former curator, a senior policy development officer from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (now merged into the Arts Council for England):

The challenge for museum professionals is that within most museums above a certain size and even smaller museums working within subsets of larger local authorities, a lot of people involved with museums will not be museum people at all, they would be accountants or HR people and people like that, and what we ought to be doing is making sure those people have those core skills because what you'll find again and again that museum people not being able to articulate the museum element and connect to it.

It will be important thus to examine the implications of this growing multiplicity of roles for museum professionalism, or at least the case for museum professionalism, and more specifically for the theoretical, technical and practical types of knowledge and expertise required for meeting the various targets and impacts now expected of museums.

The Story of the Professions

Spanning sociology and applied philosophy, there is a long-standing debate around what constitutes or ought to constitute a profession. Two polar perspectives have defined the scholarly history of the study of professions and professionalism, despite many attempts to synthesize them (Abbot, 1988; Freidson, 2001, 1994; Macdonald, 1995). Essentially the polarization is articulated around the question of whether to see what makes an occupation into a profession as ultimately grounded in some intrinsic

defining traits unique to some types of work and, correlatively, the specific forms of theoretical and practical knowledge and aptitudes required for the conduct and delivery of the work in question (this is what is known as the traits approach); or whether to see professionalism as the outcome of extrinsic factors that combine to confer the status title to professionalism as a power effect, mainly through a successful campaign and power struggle on the part of a given occupational group for professional recognition (this is known as the power approach).

In the traits approach, the defining attributes of professionalism have been widely recognized to involve a combination of a cognitive base and a normative framework. The cognitive framework consists of a combination of propositional knowledge and some form of practical knowledge developed through on-the-job, onsite or simulated training and/or apprenticeship. The ethical framework is often manifested in an explicit codified normative frame of reference, or a code of ethics that aims to normatively regulate professional conduct. Other standard components of the traits profile include the occupation having a recognized and thus 'legitimate' monopoly and authority over widely demanded tasks oriented towards the public good; a professional organization to represent the occupational field's members (both individual and organizational), coordinate their interests and make a regulatory input into the professional education and training; and a significant degree of professional autonomy, collegial control and self-regulation (Macdonald, 1995). The power paradigm in the sociology of the professions, for its part, goes a lot further than just problematizing the uniqueness of the putative traits associated with the occupations recognized as professions. It equates all the traits with the outcome of an effective mobilization of power resources on the part of a given occupation and its lobbyists (e.g. professional organizations). This is as much as to say that each occupation recognized (or—to echo Bourdieu—for that matter misrecognized) as a profession is a successful 'professional project'—in Larson's terms (1977). And this professional project as a historical process is not one of continuous irreversible progress. Just as occupations can be professionalized, they can be de-professionalized if and when the contingent circumstances and power balance that underpin their professionalism are eroded or renegotiated. These changes can relate to the occupation's prestige and the social significance of its services; its monopoly of these services due to a new balance of power vis-à-vis other occupations within the 'market' of similar or overlapping services; or new policies and a resultant new mode of governance and regulation undermining its autonomy, i.e. a new 'regulative bargain' (Cooper et al. 1988, cited in Macdonald, 1995, p. 10). Professionalism is thus an achieved status, in Weber's sense (1922/1978, p. 305), and not a necessary status that follows from widely valued traits intrinsic to the type of work in question.

Both paradigms are bound to run into some tricky difficulties—conceptually and empirically. The traits paradigm tends to view *evaluative* attributes and even self-images of some occupations as part of the substance of professions that can be descriptively determined. These defining traits occupy an ambiguous position: many of them follow from a successful campaign on the part of occupational groups, such as recognition of public value of the work/service, autonomy and legitimate monopoly. Further, there is no definitive list of traits that can be shown to be exclusively unique to occupations that are recognized as professions in contradistinction to occupations

that are not (or not yet at least). On the other hand, the power paradigm is vulnerable to a *reductio ad absurdum* based on its own etic logic (from a sociological angle external to the occupations recognized as professions): any occupation could gain professional recognition irrespective of its nature and what it requires in terms of expertise, skills, aptitudes and ‘virtues’. The chances of a given occupation to have a successful ‘professional project’, it can be argued, are not simply reducible to a game of power and political manoeuvre. An *ad absurdum* would thus reduce all possible distinctiveness of what we know as professions to markers of distinction that are symptomatic of no more than successful power games and campaigns, without signifying anything else beyond that. The essential problem in this procedure is that it rests on a dismissal or inadequate treatment of the question of occupation-specific knowledge, its kind, degree and conditions of possibility, which should be at the heart of the question of professionalization. For corresponding to each occupation staking a claim to professionalism, there *must* be an element of an at least in-principle unique assemblage of skills, theoretical knowledge, learning postures and practical dispositions (Eraut, 1994; Lum, 2009; Winch, 2010).

In a sense, there is no getting away from a certain social constructivism with regard to what it means to be a profession, but what is needed is a qualified constructivism that is not simply a matter of reiterating in some form or another the idea that a profession is reducible—*without a remainder*—to a process of interest-driven social construction through the agency of power and ideology (Lum, 2009). What is needed is a constructivism that is epistemological and methodological, and does not necessarily entail a purely constructivist (read anti-realist) ontology that denies the existence of any distinctiveness to ‘professional’ work as a matter of foregone conclusion. This boils down to a simple Kantian question: Is there a type of knowledge, or a certain unique combination of knowledges, that is professional in itself irrespective of the social conditions of possibility for its professionalization, or lack thereof, or the modes of its social and political mediations? A distinction—a Kantian one—should be made at this point between the ideal-typical or *quaestio quid juris* characterization of the professions and their messy historical instantiations. What remains then is a question of degree and relative significance (of professionalism) against the backdrop of *quid juris* criteria that should not be collapsed into their empirical manifestations, i.e. in Kantian terms, into their *quid facti* manifestation or their failure to manifest themselves. What holds as a matter of *quid juris* is that professions are essentially about the application of an abstract body of esoteric expert knowledge acquired through sustained periods of pre-service—and/or in-service—training and education. Having a distinct knowledge base, or a strong case for its latent and potential existence, is perhaps the only condition that can be confidently described as a necessary condition for the professionalism of a given occupation, albeit by no means of itself sufficient condition for its professionalization. The conceptual question in this regard is in what consists the singularity of professional knowledge, its distinctive formal and substantive determinations that are inherently epistemic and necessary, rather than merely the contingent reflection, or epistemic sublimation or displacement, of a successful power game and struggle for recognition and status. Attempting to characterize the substance of this characterization will vary from occupation to occupation; and

addressing the question will have to be conducted with reference to a specific type of work—in our case, museum work.

Museum Professional Knowledge

The case for the professionalism of museum work features prominently in the policy line of ICOM, the professional organization representing and supporting museums from 136 member countries, including through formulating and mainstreaming a coherent and universally relevant conception of the various aspects of museum professionalism (e.g. a code of ethics, professional education and training, quality standards for the delivery of museum work). Interestingly, contrary to official advocacy conceptions of professionalism coming from professional organizations that tend towards emphasizing intrinsic professional traits and projecting a sense of homogeneity across the occupational field in question, ICOM recognizes the sociological dimension of the professional status, echoing thereby the power paradigm:

For a profession to exist, moreover, it must define itself as such, and also be recognised as such by others, which is not always the case in the museum world. There is not one profession, but several museal professions, that is to say a range of activities attached to the museum, paid or unpaid, by which one can identify a person (in particular for his civil status) and place him in a social category. (ICOM, 2010, p. 67)

The conception of professionalism manifest here is one that is premised on a rather vague functional understanding of museum professionalism: (a) it is defined by involvement in a range of activities rather than by what makes the good conduct of those activities possible in terms of knowledge and expertise; (b) the conduct of activities can be paid or unpaid, i.e. done by volunteering amateurs, whilst there is a sense in which in each developing profession one of the stakes in striving for professional recognition is the distance a would-be profession would try to mark in relation to amateur versions of the same work. In parallel, however, ICOM emphasizes the correlation between the types of ‘museal professions’ and some relevant type of professional training and education. What does not seem to have received a regulatory definition, however, is specifically the nature of the professional knowledge required for what is specifically ‘museal’. The specifically museal occupational roles, as understood by ICOM (2010), can be dispersed and distributed, and are not coterminous with one occupational role; they include the activities carried out by curators, educators, outreach officers, exhibit designers, communicators and managers. It is this range of museal tasks and roles that are referenced in this paper under the rubric of museography. Museographic work is here understood not as a job description, but as a distributed and heterogeneous set of tasks that cross-cut a broad range of roles, though to varying degrees (ICOM, 2010). Thus, the overarching question remains: How to delimit the scope of what could count as types of knowledge, expertise and skills specific to museum? What constitutes what could be described as museum professional knowledge, however tentative and open the use of the term might be? What is it about museum work that makes possible, and arguably requires, a corresponding occupation-specific knowledge base?

The findings arising from the research project underpinning this paper—on changes in museums’ professional culture—clearly indicate that there is the widely held view that despite the diversity in occupational roles and organizational variations in the museum sector, the common core that should be seen as the linchpin of museum work lies in the collections:

So at every stage the collections are supreme core for projects to deliver otherwise we wouldn’t be museum workers ... We have a core responsibility, this is what we are set up to do. We are set up to record and preserve history three dimensional objects and we have collections which we are custodians of. (Member of senior management, Museum6)

The same view is shared by a policy development officer at national level who has also been a museum practitioner, defining the organizational identity of the museum in terms of:

that kind of tangible collection that actually ... I think for the sector to kind of survive, whether your marketing or in other roles, you need to understand this is all core, this is what museums is about, its about collections, the stories they have.

Taking the collections as the necessary and sufficient condition for the specifically *museal* in museum work entails putting centre-stage specifically the range and types of professional expertise and knowledge required for the museographic *mise en scène* that aims to create and facilitate semiotic, affective, perceptual and meaning-making affordances and encounters through and around the collections and, crucially, through the museographic *form* (understood by analogy with aesthetic form [Adorno, 2002]). This operational remit, however, is not limited to the role of the curator, or what Boylan (2006b) calls the scholar-curator; it also includes people who are involved in the creative assembling—the design, stagecraft and choreography—of exhibitions, as well as those whose role it is to facilitate and invent learning and dialogical values through exhibits and objects thus assembled. Thus, the angle on museum professionalism highlighted in this paper centres around the creative content of what goes on in museums in relation to the choreography and pedagogy around the collections, which is gathered under the rubric of museography.

A heuristic starting point would be to make some analytic distinctions to sketch out the constituent components of what could be putatively described as museum professional knowledge. Starting from Ryle’s classical distinction between knowing-that (or propositional knowledge) and knowing-how (practical knowledge) (Ryle, 1949/2009), whilst recognizing the conceptual and empirical limitations of this distinction (Lum, 2004), three distinct types of professional knowledge relevant to museum work could be identified which could be characterized as: (a) (disciplinary) propositional knowledge about the museum as a cultural, social, political and organizational entity; (b) propositional knowledge about know-how in the form of knowledge about case instances of museum practice; and (c) practical know-how. I will discuss in detail the properties of each of these *analytic* strands of professional knowledge as they specifically apply to museum work.

Disciplinary Propositions: To Know about Museums

Disciplinary propositional knowledge about museums—knowing-that in Ryle’s terms—consists of accounts of the phenomenon of the museum as a social, political, cultural, educational phenomenon. It is made up of propositional statements that seek to characterize, understand and explain museums, or distinct classes of museums, in terms of what goes on inside them, their structures, and the assemblages within which they are embedded in different contexts—how they relate to society, politics, history, collective memory, education, economics, etc. Propositional knowledge about the museum is derived from a number of distinct disciplines and museums have long since become an intriguing topic for people working in the humanities and social sciences, including in sociology, history, cultural studies, anthropology, economics and educational studies (Macleod, 2001; Mason, 2006; McClellan, 2007; Starn, 2005). Whilst there is no such thing as a well-bounded space of disciplinary knowledge that could be described as the distinctive content of museum studies (not yet anyway), there are a number of disciplines with a stable and generally recognizable bounded ‘turf’ of propositional knowledge that can be enlisted as feeder disciplines and harnessed to supply the propositional knowledge to feed into the synthetic space of museum studies. However, having no one well-bounded disciplinary space that corresponds to the operational field of the museum does not necessarily place the museum occupation at a disadvantage with regard to its claim to the possibility of formulating a valid body of professional knowledge for the aspiring profession. Because this is the case with management, social work, medicine and several other occupations that are classified as professions and semi-professions.³

Specifically in connection with museums as a sociocultural phenomenon, propositional knowledge is oriented primarily towards understanding (*verstehen*), as opposed to explanation which can be used as basis for extracting a predictive value (Apel, 1984). By and large, it renders what goes on in museums intelligible, but not necessarily predictable based on law-like propositions about regularity. For two reasons: first, there is the creativity of (good) museographic practice which by its very nature works against a reliable degree of predictability; second, this is so because propositional knowledge is by and large produced within academic settings, usually not with a view to their immediate utilization to inform professional practice, but—at least in principle—primarily with a view to meeting certain validity criteria and truth-values (e.g. warrantability of knowledge claims, verifiability, plausibility, descriptive adequacy). That is why this type of knowledge remains in need of a certain pedagogic mediation. Bernstein (2000) describes pedagogy as a relaying mechanism whereby knowledge is ‘recontextualized’ out of its ‘native location of production’, i.e. the research setting, and into a pedagogic educational setting. In the case of propositional knowledge about museums, it is in need of a twofold pedagogic relay: namely (a) adapting propositional knowledge about museums to make it manageable and transmittable within the constraints and possibilities of pedagogic contexts for professional education and training; and (b) drawing out the implications for practice to inform research-validated practical reasoning. This latter case involves especially what can be described, following Hoyle and John (1995), as ‘case knowledge’ which constitutes a

distinct category of knowledge that can be described as propositional knowledge about know-how.

Case Knowledge about Know-how Instances

Case knowledge is about particular *instances* of practice situations and the types of practice approaches and problem-solving responses associated with them (Hoyle & John, 1995). It is about those cases that have acquired a degree of precedent-like value for practice. Case knowledge constitutes a major dimension of propositional knowledge; it is not directly linked to the aim of formulating generalizable understanding and explanation. Its aim is the intelligibility of particular past cases, not (primarily) for the sake of generalizing and predicting about the entire field, but for the sake of using those cases as heuristic benchmarks and reference points for present and future practice.

At the root of this case, knowledge is an analogical—and to some degree inductive—reasoning predicated of professional knowledge whose archetype is the law as a field of knowledge and practice. The organizing matrix of case knowledge is premised on the axiom of the heuristic and practical value of precedents, with law taken as the exemplar model. However, understanding the role of case knowledge in museum work by analogy with knowledge of legal cases needs some hedging qualifications. We need to acknowledge the blurry zone—or tension—between two ways of interpreting and relating to the precedent: namely, either as a *sui generis* combination of givens specific to the fact of the case exemplifying what might be possible; or as having semi-otic and regulative value beyond itself, as encapsulating a norm or criterion for good or bad practice. Unlike in museum practice, in law the case as precedent—whether judicial or legislative—can become incorporated into the legal code and thus acquire a regulative and binding value and force in jurisprudence, especially in precedent-based common law systems (Siltala, 2000), when the case acquires what is called in legal terminology an authoritative status. In museum work, a case of a successful practice can acquire only a degree of exemplarity; pursuing a form of ‘precedent-following’ (Siltala, 2000) would be quite beside the point in museographic work, mainly because precedent-following in law aims to arrive at a judgement on a situation whose constituents are already present and given, whilst in museographic work, what is at stake is the design and presentation of a novel and original enough arrangement as a function of the creative handling of museographic formal properties, work techniques and materials. It follows that in museographic practice, the inductive accumulation of examples is not of itself sufficient to ground efficient and good practice, or what Majdik and Keith (2011, p. 276) aptly call ‘decisional expertise’. Case knowledge can help inspire or inform, but still in itself does not guarantee successful performance in the practice setting, given the singularity of each situation in the practice field. In fact, it could be argued that the exemplarity of previous cases in museum practice, in stark contrast to the way the case as precedent is used in law, serves as a benchmark to deviate from (rather than follow), in relation to which to achieve what Bourdieu (1993, p. 30) would call ‘the distinctive *value*’ of a creative enough instance of museography. This is because knowledge of the history of the field, as structured by

past exemplary cases, serves as a backdrop against which—following Bourdieu’s formula of the pursuit of distinction—the new in creative work needs to position itself *negatively* to be perceived, experienced and recognized as original.

To Know How to Do Museum Work

Knowing how to do museum work is arguably the most subtle piece of the jigsaw, as well as the most difficult to conceptualize, not least because of its peculiar organic character that cannot be read off from the predicates of propositional knowledge. This is because know-how—or craft knowledge—is largely non-discursive, performative, contingent and always situated (Eraut, 1994; Lum, 2004, 2009; Sturt, 1963; Winch, 2010). A good grasp of propositional knowledge about museums is no predictor of a good enactment of the know-how aspect of museography. This know-how dimension can be acquired only through exposure to participation—or immersion—in the actual setting of professional practice, and usually under the guidance—explicit or implicit—of experienced practitioners, in the context of some form of on-the-job-learning that occurs *in actu* and *in situ*. Know-how is generally used interchangeably with the concept of practical knowledge or craft knowledge, and in English-speaking contexts, as Clarke and Winch (2006) note, it is often equated with skills.

As Lum (2009) argues, there is something ontologically unique about this strand of professional knowledge. It is difficult to fit into a standard subject–object of knowledge: i.e. knowing subject vs. object of knowledge that exist in a relation of exteriority to each other. This mode of knowledge is more relational than substantive, in addition to being immanent to the space of possibilities in a given practice field. It is much less about an epistemic substance that one can carry, transmit, gain and lose the possession of, than about a corporeal posture that forms interactively and organically in relation to the materials and virtual affordances of the museographic scene. Here, know-how should be understood not as a noun, not as a substantive, but as a verb, and a very relational and processual one at that. Know-how, thus understood, is co-extensive with a relational and situated assemblage of aptitudes, postures and capabilities.

Developing situated know-how is usually facilitated through work placements, traineeships or internships where aspiring museum professionals are ‘thrown’ in the actual practice field and prompted to face practice situations and engage in problem-solving encounters. And it is through practice problems that trainees acquire—in an expansive mode of learning—aptitudes, capabilities and postures in different modes: non-discursive, discursively mediated as well as to some degree ‘discourse-led’ (Fairclough, 2003)—e.g. the ability to make a case for a proposed course of action in response to the singularity of the problem encountered. Clarke and Winch (2004) describe this initiation as having a very significant non-discursive element. Unlike the propositional aspect of professional knowledge which is marked by a high degree of codification, formalization and discursive mediation, the craft-related aptitudes acquired *in actu* are dispersed and distributed in such a way as to make their effectiveness to a great degree dependent on the trainee’s or practitioner’s active synthetic processing of the distributed and in a sense spontaneous and undesigned cues, fragments

of information to be inferred and pieced together, postures and instances of vocational knowledge, aptitudes and skills. It is experiential knowledge that follows in part from the trainee's or practitioner's inferential efforts—his/her attempt to abstract from the instances of practice that are seemingly discontinuous—and his/her ability to think through them as a continuous assemblage of practices in relation to the situation at hand and its unique givens. It is also in part a manifestation of a skill that has a non-discursive and even, as Bateson argues, unconscious side. Bateson makes a useful distinction between what he calls the fact of skill which is conscious, and what the enactment of skill is a manifestation or indication of, which is—or rather has become—unconscious as the knowledge that supports it 'sinks to deeper and deeper levels of the mind' (Bateson, 1972, 112) of the practitioner. Bateson writes: 'The sensations and qualities of skill can never be put in words, and yet the fact of skill is conscious'; this is because 'the fact of skill indicates the presence of large unconscious components in the performance' (Bateson, 1972, 114).

Further, many argue—notably Carr (2003)—that there is a distinctive moral dimension essential to know-how within the professions insofar as they offer a public service and their work by definition bears on one aspect or another of the service users' well-being (with the archetype again being a health or law professional dealing with the health or legal service user). If we were to transpose these conditions onto the museum sector, then two pertinent remarks should be made. First, there is a strong sense in which museum work has an element of what Weber would describe as a vocation (*Beruf*, which can be more accurately translated as calling to retain its spiritual and deontic connotations), i.e. a type of work that is underpinned primarily by a sense of mission sustained by strong affective attachment on the part of the professionals. Weber (1992, p. 19) defines vocation as: 'an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity'; it is both an obligation and a duty, as Weber goes on to identify 'one's duty in a calling' as critical to the notion of vocation. This point has frequently come up through the study, exemplified by what an exhibition designer from a large museum says:

I don't want to do something 9–5 or completely commercialised, just a profit, that sort of thing. I actually wanted to do something which I felt really positive about, really passionate about and wanted to come to work in the morning thinking wow this is going to be exciting, I'm going to do something interesting today. So hopefully most of the other people share that. (Exhibition designer, Museum2)

The affective commitment to museum work becomes all the more salient in light of the increasing precariousness of museum work and its high degree of job insecurity, especially following the 2008 economic crisis that saw the cultural sector in many countries hit the hardest by austerity cuts. An Education Officer captures this point in a way that resonates with many of the participants in the study:

The budget is being reduced now so we are not entirely sure if we are going to be employed in a year's time. It is part of the personal side of things,

caring about your job. Also if you are planning projects and you have worked time are you actually going to be there to finish those off? That will always be in the back of your mind, it is in the back of a lot of staff's minds to constantly worry about (a) whether you can afford it and (b) whether we will be here to finish it ... really finances is one of the main issues. (Education Officer, Museum3)

So in Weberian terms, it is a type of occupation where its actors, and *mutatis mutandis* the whole organizational ethos, are animated primarily by value-rational and affective drives, in contradistinction to the primacy of instrumental rationality in other occupations.⁴ Second, and following on from the first point, it could be argued that whilst museum work does not have service users in the traditional sense of the term, it does nonetheless fulfil a service that can lay a strong claim to being in the public interest, despite the inevitable exclusivity of some of the museum's affordances. The director of Museum6 captures both points when he states:

The reason why I work in museums, public museums, is because they are a vital public resource. I think they have a huge role to play in terms of helping people explore and determine their identity and I think that they are here for a social purpose and that is why I do it and I do it because I genuinely believe that what we do change people's life for the better and that's what drives me, not the looking after collections [as an end in itself] particularly and if I didn't think we were having a positive impact on people's lives then I would go and do something else frankly ... It's passion for what they [museum workers] do whether it's about public benefits or it's about bringing the knowledge and collections to the public, there is incredible commitment and passion.

But apart from the question of whether or not the museum's public should be seen as service users, and if so of what type, it is still worth bearing in mind that there is a value base, however contested and renegotiable, to what it means to work in museums, especially in light of the fact that museum work is universally underpaid and thus the profit motive is never the primary incentive for getting into a museum career. The value base of museum work is thus emphasized by a policy development officer at London level:

you cannot have a cultural institution which doesn't believe in its own value, value of its own collections ... I think it's right we open up museum, that museums are great places, public places, people come, people have lunch, they make friends, those things are fine but the museums, the thing that's special about museums is that there has to be collections, that have experts at the heart of them. And if you empty all that you have a museum without object. You just have another public face like any other.

This value base consists of several facets: care of the collections, trusteeship in relation to future generations, extracting public value out of the collections and the museums, the pursuit of knowledge in and via what museums do as well as making this

knowledge accessible, an ethic of difference, etc. But above all, I would argue, museum work ought to construct its value base around an ethic of creativity immanent to the mode of existence unique to museums.

Conclusion

The question that this paper has sought to formulate and tentatively approach is: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for beginning to think museography as a professional genre its own right? Against the backdrop of theories of professionalism, and in light of the crucial importance of identifying the knowledge and value base for professionalism, it has been shown that museum work poses a number of *sui generis* questions that need to be treated in light of the uniqueness of museum work. This is of crucial importance theoretically and for practice: to offer an adequate formulation of those questions—often asked of all professions—specifically in relation to museography. What marks museum work out from other types of work classified as professions or semi-professions (Etzioni, 1969) is the constitutive place a unique form of creativity occupies in the work of museography and its requisite craft knowledge. This creativity has not been sufficiently recognized or theorized; perhaps to some degree overshadowed by the creativity predicated of the artefacts on display, and their aura of first-order creativity and/or historicity. This museographic creativity cannot be extrapolated from the logic of induction—typical of other professional practice parameters—that derives present practice from past instances or generalizable formulae for practice that have been mapped through propositional knowledge (whether acquired within formal or informal learning environments).

The vocation or calling of the museum as a type of occupational activity is situated within a unique institution poised at the intersection of various institutional archetypes, but should ultimately affirm the museum's creative composition through the formal and material means unique to museographic work. This involves a type of museographic *bricolage*—in Lévi-Strauss's sense of the term (Lévi-Strauss, 1962/1966)—whose materials and form of signification are carved out of assemblages that synthesize objects, ideas, genres, inaudible voices and syncretic durations. In parallel and bound up with the museographic *bricolage*, in terms of the value base for museum work, the challenge is to cultivate an ethic of creativity, an ethic of pushing creation to breaking point, and bringing out the potential of both objects and humans. The human intersubjectivity involved in the creative compositional endeavour are not reducible to museographers, but involve the asynchronous and heterogeneous intersubjectivities that occupy a unique manifold duration: including the producers of the original artefacts (and the sociocultural horizon within which their objects and object-making are situated) as well as the museum audiences, present and future, and also past audiences, all of whom constitute the content of spaces and objects of display in museums, as Bataille (1930/1986, p. 25) notes long before the recent centring of the public in museum theory and practice: 'We must realize that the halls and art objects are but the container, whose content is formed by the visitors. It is the content that distinguishes a museum from a private collection'.

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Notes

1. The profiles of the participating organizations are as follows:

- Museum1: art museum; located in the West Midlands; local authority-funded; medium-to-small; workforce of 22 people; 6 interviewed.
- Museum2: science museum; London; DCMS-funded; very large museum; workforce 200+; 7 interviewed.
- Museum3: generalist museum; Southwest of England; local authority-funded; medium; workforce of 35; 6 interviewed.
- Museum4: local social history/art museum; London; local authority-funded; small; workforce of 6; founded early 1990s; 2 interviewed.
- Museum5: archaeology and social history museum; London; DCMS-funded; one of the biggest/oldest; workforce 200+; 6 interviewed.
- Museum6: science museum; Northeast; local authority-funded; medium; workforce of around 50; 7 interviewed.
- Museum7: art; London; local authority-funded; founded late 1980s; small; workforce of 8; 1 interviewed.
- Museum8: generalist museum; London; local authority-funded; small; workforce of 4; 1 interviewed.
- Museum9: local history; London; local authority-funded; small; workforce of 8; 1 interviewed.
- MLA: 3 senior policy development/implementation officers.
- The Museums Association: 1 senior policy development/implementation officer.
- Campaign for Learning through Museums/Galleries (CLMG), now Culture: Unlimited: Director.
- Greater London Authority: 1 senior policy development officer in arts, culture and creative industries unit.

2. In an essay titled 'Different Spaces', Foucault identifies a peculiar type of the arrangement of space that is particularly noticeable in modern societies. In contradistinction to utopias, Foucault characterizes this type of place as heterotopia, and identifies several principles by which they can be identified as places with peculiar relations to time, space, movement and mainstream norms. Although the principles he sets out widen the scope of what could be fitted into this category to the point of somewhat blurring its sharp empirical reference (e.g. to include prisons, cemeteries, gardens, theatre, cinema, festivals, etc.), still his concept of heterotopia is very useful analytically, and is quite applicable to museums, and in fact he cites the museum—as well as the library—as an example of heterotopia:

Museums and libraries are heterotopias in which time never ceases to pile up and perch on its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, and up to the end of the seventeenth century still, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside time and protected from its erosion, the project of thus organizing a kind of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move—well, in fact, all of this belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are characteristic of Western culture in the nineteenth century. (1994, p. 182)

3. Medicine, for example, which is often adduced and studied as the archetype of all professions, has no subject discipline that is consubstantial with it. It draws on a number of distinct disciplines, including physiology, the multiple branches of biology, chemistry and even subject disciplines that fit into the social sciences to address psychosomatic illnesses. The heterogeneity of the subject-knowledge base of medicine can be explained by the fact that medicine, strictly speaking, is not a field of knowledge production; it is a field of knowledge application the acquisition of which has to go through some form of what Bernstein would call pedagogic relay (mainly simulated practice, apprenticeship, traineeship, internship)—the expert creative application of bits and pieces of esoteric knowledge drawn from various sources in the context of problem-solving tasks in the field.
4. Weber sees a certain attitudinal posture as essential to the spirit of vocation as ‘a life-task’ (1992, p. 39); it requires an attitude that ‘is freed from continual calculations of how the customary wage may be earned with a maximum of comfort and a minimum of exertion. Labor [as calling] must, on the contrary, be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling’ (Weber 1930/1992, p. 25). The sense of vocation was a frequent theme in the accounts gathered through the research that underpins this paper.

Notes on contributor

Anwar Tlili is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education & Professional Studies at King’s College London. He has carried out research and written on the themes of social justice in/through museums and formal and informal education; cultural policies and cultural organizations; science in society; and science and democracy. Other interests include aesthetics and the philosophy of education and science.

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